Castlemaine Naturalist

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Ted Errey Track Excursion

Ten stalwarts set off to tackle the Ted Errey Nature Trail in the Brisbane Ranges on Saturday May 11. The weather was perfect, with high light cloud, sun, and very little wind. We left Castlemaine at 9am and were at the Stony Creek picnic area by 20 to 11. Morning tea was a priority before we set out, and the little Brown Treecreepers that had joined Margaret Badminton and me for lunch there nearly 12 months ago seemed to have increased in numbers, but the Rufous Fantails and Powerful Owl still didn't show up.

The track, as Ern had warned, was quite steep in a couple of places, but as we were all aware of that, we set off well prepared. I found that the way up to the top wasn't as bad as I had expected, but the way back down from the lookout on the Rowsley fault at the start of this decent was another story! This was one of three lookouts we visited. It is situated right at the edge of the fault line, which is much more impressive than the Muckleford fault, being a steep escarpment which overlooks Port Phillip. The other two overlooked the gorge.

The track is a fascinating one, as the vegetation continually changes, according to aspect and soil type, but, unfortunately, some is affected by Cinnamon Fungus. There are patches where the grass trees are dead because of this menace and this was why it was important that we kept to the tracks.

There was a surprising number of plants in flower, particularly heaths, and three different Greenhood orchids were found; Tiny *Pterostylus parviflora*, Autumn *P. revoluta*, and another one. Forty one bird species were recorded, with Brown Treecreepers, White-eared and White-naped Honeyeaters predominating, but the thrill of the day was a Whites, or Speckled, Thrush.

Thanks Ern, and Lesley, for sharing one of your special places with us.

Rita Mills

Recent additions to the Castlemaine Plant List

Ixia (**Ixia maculata)* is a garden escape and a troublesome weed in Kaweka. It produces numerous bulbils, which makes eradication very difficult.

Thread Iris (**Gynandiris setifolia*) is small plant resembling Onion Weed, except that the flowers are a pale mauve, blotched with orange or purple, and the leaf is thread-like. It grows on our highway cleanup area.

Belladona Lily (**Amaryllis belladonna)* is another garden escape, and can be found as a weed in numerous places.

Kneed Spear-grass *(Austrostipa bigeniculata)* has been recorded on the Guildford Plateau. It is a native spear-grass.

Slender Pigeon-grass (**Setaria gracilis* var. *pauciseta*) is a slender grass with a narrow, cylindrical flower clusters. It is a street weed in Castlemaine.

Common Everlasting (*Chrysocephalum* sp. 2). This is an undescribed species that has been separated from *Chrysocephalum apiculatum.* Species 2 can often be recognised because of its smaller size. Possibly most, if not all, of the local Common Everlastings are the new species.

Spiny Broom (*Calicoma spinosa*) is similar to Cape Broom, but is spiny. A most unwelcome addition. It is well established at Yandoit.

Australian Gypsywort (*Lycopis australis*) has been recorded for the Loddon River at Glenluce by Ian Higgins. It is a native member of the mint family.

Pink Wood-sorrel *(*Oxalis articulata*) has been recorded at Wesley Hill and at Taradale. It is a pink-flowered oxalis. It does not produce bulbils, and the root is covered with the remains of dead leaves.. It is probably a garden escape.

Small Milkwort (*Comesperma polygaloides*) is a small member of the milkwort family, and a rare and endangered species. It is growing on the Guildford Plateau.

Honeysuckle (**Lonicera japonica*) is another garden escape. There is rampant growth of this weed in some of the Chewton gullies, where it is climbing over native and introduced vegetation.

Sticky Cape Gooseberry (**Physalis viscosa*) is a noxious weed. It is growing along the railway line in Castlemaine. It is a plant to about 30 cm, with bright yellow tube flowers. The plant is covered with sticky hairs, and the fruit is inside a bladdery calyx (and hence 'gooseberry'.

White-tip Nightshade (**Solanum chenopodioides*) is a plant that prefers wet areas. It resembles the more familiar Black Nightshade (often misidentified as Deadly Nightshade). It differs in more toothed leaves which are paler beneath, the sharply angled fruit stalks, and the narrower petals. It is growing along the Loddon River at Newstead, and along Forest Creek in Castlemaine.

Prickly Pear (**Opuntia paraguayensis*) is a prickly pear with narrowly-oval stems, few spines, and yellow flowers. There is a dense patch in Lyttleton Street.

Bathurst Burr (**Xanthium spinosum*) has previously been recorded at Bells Swamp. It is also growing along the Pyrenees Highway at Chewton. It is a spiny plant with spiny fruit, and is a noxious weed.

Wild Teasel (**Dipsacus fullonum* ssp. *fullonum*) has been recorded at Vaughan by Darren Bos. This noxious weed is a tall prickly-stemmed plant with a distinctive, terminal, prickly ovoid flower cluster. The bracts (leaves at the flower base) curve upwards and are longer than the flowers.

Swift Parrot Count

At 8.30 on Saturday morning, 25th of May, six intrepid members and one intrepid visitor braved the cold frosty conditions to go in search of the elusive Swift Parrot.

Margaret Badminton led the team into various known habitats including the Castlemaine Golf Links, Red White and Blue mine, where we had our morning tea in bright sunshine, 'though it was still chilly. We meandered through the Box-Ironbark forest including the South German mine area, but without success. The Swifties were elusive or "not at home". There was very little blossom anywhere - mainly on the very late flowering Grey Box, and that only in patches.

We were met at lunch time by Maggie Oliver and Geoff Nevill at the Quince Tree, which was very quiet, without even the usual Fuscous Honeyeaters.

After lunch, in mild and sunny still conditions, we went to the Gower School area to resume our search, but to no avail. Our excursion results are still important to the overall survey as it shows with a fair degree of accuracy where the Swifties weren't in this area.

The active team recorded a very good list of other birds in the process, including White-browed Babblers, Flame, Scarlet and Eastern Yellow Robins (but still no Hooded), Musk and Little Lorikeets, and the highlight of the day, a good look at a Crested Bell-bird. There were actually three seen during the count.

Maureen and Ken Dredge.

Everything You Didn't Want to Know about Cane Toads!

A recent information sheet put out by the Northern Territory Parks and Wildlife Commission makes it clear that the cane Toad, *Bufo marimus* is here to stay, and will colonise all of the Top End right through the Kakadu wetlands and into much of the Kimberly and more of northern NSW in coming years. Native to Central and South America, Cane Toads are a pest in Australia after being introduced to Queensland in 1935 in the mistaken belief that they would control Cane Grubs. The introduced Cane Toad has an extremely high reproductive rate compared with native frog species. Female toads can become sexually mature within one year and are able to lay clutches of up to 30,000 eggs several times in one year.

In the early 1980s they crossed from Queensland into the Northern Territory and there are now millions in the Northern Territory expanding their range at a rate of about 30 km each year. By 2010 - 2020 they will have reached Darwin.

More research has been done in Australia on Cane Toads that anywhere else in the world, concentrating on understanding more about the physiology of the species, the impact on native fauna and looking for biological control agent. In one study 3,253 toads were removed from three adjacent waterholes over a five night period, and yet still more remained, indicative that total eradication from an area would be extremely labour intensive, costly and only likely to be partially effective.

Given climate warming, will the Cane Toad turn south and head for Castlemaine?! Now for my part - the stuff that fantasies are made of! - if only rabbits would prey on Cane Toads, and in turn be eaten by foxes, then we could get rid of the lot!

Chris Morris

A Swarm of Swallows?

At Green Gully on Friday May 24 about 6 o'clock, just as it was getting dark, Gunter Leibel decided to take his dogs for a walk down past his quarter acre habitat dam, and was astonished to find the air above the dam black with swallows, he thought probably Welcome Swallows, dipping and swirling around "in layers" above the dam itself. He stood on the bank of the dam watching them, and found that there were none out from the bank over the paddock. He guessed that there were well over 1000 in the flock, and yet they were all flying in unison, only centimetres apart, and yet there were no collisions. He thought that some may have been scooping up water as the surface of the dam broke into ripples from time to time, but he was rather mystified as to what they were actually doing, though he thought that,

because he has planted the dam for habitat, there were probably insects in the air above the dam, and it was possible that they were feeding, and getting ready to migrate north.

He had seen a flock of about 200 birds (as far as he could make out without binoculars) above the dam a few days before. When he went down with a video camera the evening after the huge numbers had been there, there was only the usual two or three birds flying over the water.

61 Hunter Street, Autumn Birds

The presence of ravens, currawongs and several Red Wattlebirds has intimidated many of the smaller visitors to our area. I have rarely seen wrens this summer, the Yellow-rumped Thornbills and Silvereyes drink and bathe hastily before departing, a few Yellow-faced and New Holland Honeyeaters appear regularly to feed and bathe. Crimson Rosellas are always around and occasionally we see Eastern Rosellas also.

Sadly, there has been a complete absence of Common Bronzewings this season, neither sight nor sounds. Musk Lorikeets have been in abundance over a longer period than usual. At present they are feeding on the blossom of the fine-leafed Peppermint in our back yard, and they often rest there during the day. There is a small flock of about ten.

The first Scarlet Robin has appeared, and at 10 o'clock one evening a juvenile Southern Boobook perched on the roof of the workshop/garage, obviously attracted by a few insects at the outside lights.

The overall impression is that all of the birds are hungry this year, which is not surprising in the absence of rain and few blossoming eucalypts.

Away from the house, at Kalimna Point last weekend I found a few Grey Box trees covered with blossom and attracting so many bees they could be heard from some distance away - no Swift Parrots though (last Autumn I saw a small flock near the dam where the nest boxes have been placed).

The Red Box trees are not in flower this year as far as I can see, and very few birds are around, not even the Crimson Rosellas. Red Wattlebirds, Blue Wrens and occasional Yellow-tufted Honeyeaters were all that I saw.

Shirley Parnaby.

Observations

• On Sunday April 28 a flock of small birds fluttering around the trunks of the Yellow Gums at 118 Blakeley Road, landing, flicking pieces of bark away and catching insects or spiders presumably, proved to be a flock of Brown-headed Honeyeaters. Their behaviour seemed almost robin-like. Rita Mills

• Lesley Perkins reported that there were 8 Brown-headed Honeyeaters in their bird bath on Thurs. May 2.

• A male and a female Flame Robin were seen by Maureen Dredge at their place in Wesley Hill.

• Ern Perkin's daughter could hardly believe her eyes when she spotted a Stubble Quail on the Castlemaine Railway Station platform. It crouched about a metre away from the tracks as the Melbourne bound train roared up, but didn't move until the Bendigo bound train arrived at platform 2, when it shifted a metre or two, and crouched again. It then hastened away when the train had gone.

• Craig Moody has found White-browed Babblers at Eppalock.

• Robyn Holden has had a Rufous Whistler at her place at Hunter Street.

• Lesley and Ern Perkins have found Parsons Bands on Youngmans Track in the area where the control burn was carried out in 1997, and in Kalimna.

• Numerous small birds were active in the bush at Barkers Creek during the U3A/FNC outing on Thurs. May 23, including Fuscous Honeyeaters and a flock of about 20 Varied Sitellas. Altogether we had a list of 22 species for the 1 ¼ hours we were out. This despite the fact that it was overcast and cold. At least it didn't rain.

• Later that day there was a flock of about 30 Varied Sitellas at 118 Blakeley Road which is only about 800m from where they were seen in the morning.

• Rita Mills has found that the Musk Lorikeets near her place have mostly moved on after the rain, but Richard Piesse and Maggie Oliver are still seeing them in quite large numbers.

• There has been a large flock of lorikeets, mainly Musk, in the flowering gums in Mostyn Street near the Restorers Barn, along with quite a number of New Holland Honeyeaters. The noise stopped, and the New Hollands took refuge in a dense berry bush not far from the trees, when a Little Falcon came on the scene. The din started again as soon as it left, and the frantic feeding recommenced. Rita Mills.

• Ern Perkins noted that there is virtually no flowering among the Ironbarks at the moment, and that the Grey Box, in flower now, is having a very late season. They are usually in bloom about the beginning of autumn. He also commented that he found that the rain has not penetrated the ground in the bush more that about 1 cm because the ground is too dry and is resisting becoming wet.

• The reality of the drought conditions was brought home to me when I went up to my two Atlassing spots in the Wattle Flat bush for the first time since January. The understory is very depleted since that time, and dead plants abound. The Dusty Miller *Spiridium parvifolium*, has been having a struggle for several years, but it was interesting to find a number of young plants about 4 or 5 cm high, but talk of another *el nino* in these circumstances is alarming to say the least.

• After the Swift Parrot Count Margaret Badminton decided to check out the Shicer Gully area at Guildford. There was lots of Grey Box in flower, and, though she didn't see any Swift Parrots, she found hundreds of honeyeaters and Little Lorikeets. She also has had a family of Crested Shrike-tits visit her garden, and the Grey Shrike-thrush is back after a long absence.

FROM THE BUSINESS MEETING 23/5

About 200 small stakes have now been put in marking the *Pimelea spinescens* on the Guildford plateau.

Note that the **Broom Pull** will now be held a **day later on Thurs. Aug. 15** at 9am in the Butterfly area of the gardens

87 **Bursaria seedlings** have been planted in the butterfly section of the Botanic Gardens. The plants were propagated, from seed collected from the gardens, by Penny Garnett, John and Nina Cole and Lorraine Peat. They were planted in small clumps, and marked by small bamboo stakes so they can be monitored easily. We can look forward to seeing them providing food for the butterflies in a few year's time.

Richard Piesse recommends a visit to **the Gardens**, particularly at the Walker Street end, **to see the improvement in Barkers Creek** after the removal of weeds, and the effort to improve it as a stream.

Considerable **weed clearing** has been done opposite the gardens along the railway in Downes Road and also near McMannus Road bridge at Barkers Creek.

Greening Australia, in partnership with **Vens Creek Nursery**, and supported by the NCCNA, DNRE, Natural Heritage Trust, Bushcare, Alcoa and Loddon Shire Council, are holding a **Native Plants Field Day** "How to Value the Environment" on **Wednesday June 19,** from 10am to 4pm at Vens Creek Nursery on the **Boort Yando Road, Yando**, Vic. Roads Ref. Map 29 E3.

There is a wide range of activities from information on such things as seed collection, cleaning and storage, smoked water treatment for seeds, Agroforestry, and mechanical planting; there are fox and cat traps for sale, (and plans if you wish to make your own), etc. etc. No admission charge, but

drinks and meals will be available, supplied by local clubs. For more information contact Vens Creek Nursery 5455 2154 or Greening Australia 5455 7458.

CASTLEMAINE NATURALIST MAY 2002

PROGRAM

General Meetings are held in the Uniting Church (UCA) hall, at 8.00pm on the second Friday of each month, except January.

Excursions leave promptly at times stated, usually on the Saturday after the general meeting. There are NO excursions on TOTAL FIRE BAN days. **Also note** that outdoor events are likely to be cancelled in extreme weather conditions.

Business Meetings are held at 27 Doveton Street on the 4th Thursday of each month, except December, at 7.30pm. All members are invited to attend.

VISITORS ARE ALWAYS WELCOME TO CLUB MEETINGS AND EXCURSIONS

Fri. June **14** **Surveying in the Box Ironbark Forests** with Garry Cheers of Maryborough FNC. UCA hall at 8pm.

Sat. June **15** A visit to the **Moody property**, Lyal, on the shores of Lake Eppalock. Leave Chirp, Mostyn at 1.30pm. Leaders, Moody family.

NB - The dates in **June** are the **14th and 15th** not as I had it earlier! Ed.

Fri. July 12 **Reptiles.** The speaker is Darren Green of Bendigo. UCA hall, 8pm

Sat July 13, **Fungi at Bullarto Res**. Leave 13 Mostyn St at 1.30pm.

Thurs. Aug. **15.** Broom Pull at the Butterfly area of the Botanic Gardens. 9am start. Details later. **Note change of date.**

Fri. Oct. 11 - **The Biological Control of Weeds**, Speaker is Dr David McLaren of the Keith Turnbull Institute. UCA hall, 8pm.

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Disclaimer - The opinions expressed in this newsletter are those of the contributor and not necessarily those of the club.

2002 Committee E. Perkins (President) ph 5472 3124, C. Morris (V.P. and Grievance Officer), G. Broadway (Sec.). ph. 5472 2513, H. van Gemert (treas.), R. Mills (N/L Ed. and P.O.), M. Badminton, G. Harris, B. Maund, M. Oliver, R. Piesse.

Subscriptions for 2002 Ordinary Membership: Single ,$22 Family, $30
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Supporting: $31
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